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ABSTRACT

Organizational stratification and writers' attitudes played an important part in the rejection of a proposed editorial review program at a university computing center. A peer review board, which consisted of four composition instructors, was established by the center director, in cooperation with a composition teacher consultant, to ensure the quality of user documentation written by engineering faculty. However, program and systems analysts, managers, and other center personnel generally refused to participate in peer review. Time constraints placed on routine writing tasks, writers' attitudes, and other sociopolitical elements of the environment did not allow the proper atmosphere for an autonomous, writer-supported peer group. The writers considered themselves to be good writers and resented the fact that the director questioned their ability. In addition, the management style of one major division at the center did not support any form of collaborative writing. Further, no systems were in place to evaluate the effectiveness of writing, to promote the importance of writing among staff, and to offer assistance, in the form of policies, guidelines or manuals, to help writers with their tasks. (Author/SKC)

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THE POLITICS OF PEER REVIEW IN A NONACADEMIC SETTING

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Abstract

This paper examines the part that organizational stratification and writers' attitudes played in the rejection of an editorial review board at a university computing center. The peer review board had been established by the center director, in cooperation with the author, to ensure the quality of user documentation. However, program and systems analysts, managers, and other center personnel generally refused to participate in peer review. Time constraints placed on routine writing tasks, writers' attitudes, and other sociopolitical elements of the environment did not allow the proper atmosphere for an autonomous, writer-supported peer group. Writers considered themselves to be good writers and resented the fact that the director had questioned their writing ability. In addition, the management style of one major division at the center did not support any form of collaborative writing. Further, no systems were in place to evaluate the effectiveness of writing, to promote the importance of writing among staff, and to offer assistance, in the form of policies, guidelines or manuals, to help writers with their tasks.

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At the 1984 Annual Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, I had the opportunity to buy a copy of the 1975 NCTE publication, The Teaching of Technical Writing. According to its editors, Donald H. Cunningham and Herman A. Estrin, this collection of articles and papers by engineers and teachers of English and technical writing was to have served, a decade ago, as a guide for the English teacher in the field of technical writing. As a composition teacher working as consultant to members of a university Computing Center, I wanted to find out how these authors perceived the application of composition theory and pedagogy in the technological workplace. Though most argued, as the editors note in their preface, "that the technical and scientific writing course merits a place in the curriculum and deserves the best efforts of the English-teaching profession" (ix), the place of the English-teaching professional in the technical environment was much less clearly defined.

In "Communications--The Engineer's Job," originally printed in 1963, J. Richard Johnson claims that engineers "have been given the feeling that writing should all be turned over to a technical writer or some English major who, though not knowing the first thing about the basics of the subject, has such a `tremendous familiarity with technical terms,' a copy of Fowler or Evans, and such a nice typewriter with Greek letters on it, that supposedly he can make a better job of the paper or report than the engineer could" (52). Johnson further states, referring to Michaelson: "The process of human communication is essentially mental, and the engineer's mastery of it is a goal that cannot be separated from himself as a person and all his other talents" (51). When the engineer establishes "the incentive and respect" for the writing or speaking project, says Johnson, "the syntax and the rhetoric somehow take care of themselves" (51).

During the more than twenty years since Johnson offered this account of the engineer's communication process, we have learned much about the nature

of writing in the workplace. We know, for example, that far too often the syntax and the rhetoric do not take care of themselves, that in fact much technical material is incomprehensible to its intended audience. Recent studies have also shown that the process of communication among engineers and other professionals is not "essentially mental," but is instead inextricably bound to the sociopolitical context of the work setting, in the sense that the complex chains of command and the systems in place to evaluate the effectiveness of writing determine within that environment the nature and function of writing as well as writers' attitudes (see, for example, Odell; Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller; and Selzer, among others). Engineers rely extensively on collaboration with co-workers and supervisors while writing both for internal and external audiences. The collaborative process also is often formalized as an aspect of the project management approach; for example, in an environment where software is designed, the quality circle responsible for ensuring the effectiveness of computer code produced by the project team also acts much like a peer review group in generating, reviewing, and revising supporting documentation for the project.

Given this built-in peer evaluation, we might expect that the contemporary composition teacher would have more to offer to a community of engineers than mere editing skills. Because the peer group procedures proposed by Peter Elbow and James Moffett, among others, are based on dialogic models of composing, it appears possible that they could be adapted to engineers' needs. Peer groups could be designed to help technical writers become more sensitive to the rhetorical contexts for their discourse; and the writing instructor, as facilitator for such writers' workshops, would serve as the ideal lay audience while also providing writing strategies tailored to that specific environment.

The actual transference of classroom pedagogy to the workplace, however, will not always be so readily accomplished. Time constraints placed on rou-

tine writing tasks, writers' attitudes, and other sociopolitical elements of the environment may not allow the proper atmosphere for a decentered, autonomous, writer-supported peer group. Today, I want to report on one such attempt to bring classroom practice into a nonacademic setting--an attempt which failed because environmental conditions would not permit the establishment of formalized peer review.

Establishing the Peer Group

At the request of the director of a Computing Center, I along with five other members of my English department at a New York State university presented during the fall of 1982 an eight-week workshop to selected personnel. The director previously had learned of the peer group procedures used extensively in our writing classes and had invited us to apply these approaches at her Center. The director believed that writers there "had the basic skill; they just needed somebody to raise their consciousness about it." She did not, however, want to tell her staff this in a direct way. "I thought some kind of indirect program [would be appropriate]," she said, "and they would respond."

The workshop did have some perceivable effect on writing at the Center, according to the director, and upon completion of the program, she asked that it be continued but in a somewhat different form. She announced in a memorandum to the entire staff that "For want of a better term, an 'editorial board' is being established." This Board was to consist of four staff members and myself as consultant. The director charged the Board with "assuring a level of quality to documents and publications issued by the Computing Center by providing 'peer review' and feedback before final printing. As such it will function much as a computer program code review assures quality code or as a 'quality circle' might operate." She allowed the Board freedom to establish its own procedures, select its own chair, and schedule its own

meetings. Board "appraisal" of documents, the director stated in her memorandum, could be "invoked by management" or requested by writers themselves.

Although the director later told me that she had had no intention of creating the Board as an extension of management, but simply had wanted to set up a framework for its autonomous operation, members of that group and other personnel considered her approach to be autocratic. As the Center's documentation specialist paraphrased the director's memo: "We're not doing very good, folks, so I'm going to make you do good by-- --. And here's the Review Board, and they're going to fix what you've done. And you will go to them, and writing quality will improve."

The Board tried to offset this memorandum by issuing one of its own, more invitational in tone, which stressed that the Board would act only in "an advisory capacity." Although it would "make suggestions" to improve readability and would "help in selecting an appropriate style and format, this does not mean that recommendations must be followed."

Despite this strategy, only two staff members met with us during that first semester of the Board's operation. And even these writers considered our suggestions as directives from on high. The manager of one writer went so far as to accuse the Board of recommending changes in user documentation that resulted in technical inaccuracies, but this criticism, the documentation specialist later told me, was intended for the director, not the Board.

The Board was disbanded at the end of that semester, but at my request, it was reinstated for the following term. I had informed the director of our problem with lack of participation and advised her that the Board should take a different procedural approach, one which would be more apt to entice writers to use its services, short of mandating that they do. Because the writers who had worked with us were in the completion stages of their writing tasks, they seemed generally unwilling to accept our suggestions, which would have required them to alter major portions of their documents. These writers

apparently expected editing from the Board, not collaboration. I told the director that in order to be considered as a true panel of peers, the Board would need to collaborate with writers during the initial stages of composing, when writers would be less committed to the exact prose on the page.

The director released a second memorandum announcing the Board's return and stating verbatim the policies and procedures as listed in the Board's first memo to the staff. She also noted that she wanted documents reviewed "during the writing process." Despite my warnings that writers should not be required to use the Board, however, the director mentioned specific documents that she wanted brought in to us. The responsibility for scheduling the review of this material was assigned to the Board chairperson.

At its reorganizational meeting, the Board decided that it would not assume such a managerial role. Board members even elected to change our name from "Editorial Review Board" to "Computer Center Writing Committee," believing that the latter title sounded more "user friendly." A memorandum was released inviting writers to "stop in and see us" and promising that the Board would "suggest techniques you can use to help you write more efficiently." In general, the Board attempted through this memorandum to appeal to writers' needs while at the same time to present a new image of itself through a more personal and friendly writing style:

> For many of us in the Computing Center, writing is a part of our jobs. Unfortunately, we often find ourselves spending too much time on a document and being dissatisfied with the result. The Writing Committee is here to help you. If you have a document in draft form, or if you are having trouble getting started with a document, we can assist you.

Center writers responded with even greater resistance to the Board's efforts. During that entire semester, the Board spoke with only one staff member, who shared an outline and rough notes for a lengthy report she was compiling. The Board consequently spent much of its meeting time discussing

how to increase participation. We even considered designing a questionnaire and implementing a record keeping procedure at the Center's consulting office, believing that once writers realized that their documents might be ineffective, as assessed by users and clients, they would be more willing to accept us.

But these good intentions died in the planning stage. Some members said that if the Board went ahead with its plans, the documentation specialist--who was absent the day we discussed this--would be insulted, since she was responsible for rewriting much of the user material from the Center. By the end of that semester, Board members were so discouraged and apathetic that we decided to dissolve the Board as a formal body, though members agreed to continue to make themselves available to writers on an individual basis.

Constraints on Collaboration

Why did the peer review approach fail in this particular setting? According to Board members, the format and intent of the Board were not to blame. They even felt that the presence of a writing consultant was necessary, as several members indicated, "to articulate what we do instinctively" and to increase awareness of the rhetorical contexts which shape Center discourse. "If I were king of this little world," the Board chair said, "I would definitely want someone from outside the Center, someone with experience in writing and in the more theoretical aspects."

What ultimately doomed the Board to extinction within this world, members agreed, were two conditions: time constraints and writers' attitudes. "Everybody works in the emergency mode around here," the documentation specialist said. "We just don't have the time to [take part in a formalized peer review process]." Another member labeled the Board "a luxury." "People are not used to doing things in this way," she said. "You can write the best

memo in the world [to entice writers to use peer review] but that's not going to change the way people do things."

Writers also seemed to resent the fact that the director had questioned their writing ability, even though the director herself was the first to submit material to the Board. As the Board chair put it, "Resentment is not a rational process. All the reasonable words in the world can be put on a piece of paper [the Board's "friendly" memo], and I don't know if it would make any difference." He contended that "the first and most basic problem we will never overcome is the fact that we were originally set up and presented as a Board of review, performing almost a quality control function."

The Center director offered a somewhat different interpretation of why writers resisted her efforts. She said that she had expected the Board chair to contact managers and to schedule review of specific documents; because the chair chose not to do so, writers did not take advantage of the Board's services. She also indicated that of greater impact than the Board's lack of planning was a condition she called "passive-aggressive resistance," a management style that did not support any form of collaborative writing. "People have not been used to putting things together in writing and getting feedback up the chain of command," she said. The director singled out one of the three major divisions at the Center which she said had been reorganized into a project management concept only after the Board had already been dissolved. "They're not used to the give-and-take of a tight group," she said of this division, which was responsible for instructional and research support services as well as documentation. "They've been given separate labels for each of their fiefdoms, and they haven't been forced to cooperate and work on projects."

When asked how the Center evaluated the effectiveness of its writing, how it promoted the importance of writing among its staff, and what assistance it offered, in the form of policies, guidelines or manuals, to help

writers with their tasks, the director said there were no systems in place other than the review Board and an elaborate job performance evaluation process which, though very general in its reference to oral and written communication skills, does encourage managers to evaluate supporting documentation for projects. This evaluation, however, is internal; there is no systematic process by which the primary audience for most of this documentation--the users and clients themselves--may comment on the effectiveness of the writing.

Results from a 47-item questionnaire I distributed to the Center staff during the fall of 1984 indicate that writers' self-perceptions may have played a significant role in the rejection of formalized peer review. Designed with assistance from the director, the associate director, and the assistant director, the questionnaire sought information about writers' attitudes, the rhetorical contexts for the writing tasks most often performed, and the writing processes by which these tasks are completed. Twenty-three percent of the 52-member professional and classified staff returned completed questionnaires.

These administrators, managers, analysts, and programmers generally considered themselves to have more than adequate ability for the writing tasks they performed. Sixty-six percent of the respondents rated their skills as either "excellent" or "very good." While 75 percent said that successful completion of these most-often performed types of writing--primarily user instructions and memoranda--was "extremely important" or "very important" to overall job performance, most of the respondents (75 percent) said they had not attended a writing course, program, or seminar since their initial on-the-job training for these tasks. When asked if they would participate in a program of instruction relating to these specific types of writing, 75 percent responded either "maybe" or that they would not. Sixty-

six percent left blank the follow-up question, "Why not?", with 25 percent indicating that their writing skills were adequate.

Contrary to the director's observation that collaborative writing does not seem to be common at the Center, more than half of the respondents said that while writing they depend upon co-workers and supervisors for assistance. They also look to colleagues to determine the effectiveness of their writing. Twenty-five percent of the respondents listed the activity "brainstorm with colleagues" among the top five activities performed during the planning stage for a writing assignment. Fifty-eight percent said that they ask colleagues for feedback before finishing a first draft of a task, and the same percentage of respondents said that while preparing to write a second draft they have a co-worker or supervisor respond to the previous draft.

Changing Attitudes toward Peer Review

It is important to note that even in an environment such as this, where collaborative writing <u>is</u> supported (at least to a limited extent), a formalized peer review system may not be feasible. Other constraints may conspire to undermine any effort to adapt the peer group concept to the workplace. The degree to which a writers' workshop is tenable in a professional setting will depend upon how accommodating that environment is to the basic approaches of peer review. For example, if a writing group is not decentered, that is, if it has not achieved autonomy from managerial rule, writers will perceive the group as an editing body--a board of review--and not as a vehicle for collaborative writing. Without such autonomy, the writing consultant, an interloper in this work world, will be seen as the handbook-thumping English major of J. Richard Johnson's day, or even as an agent of management, sent from on-high to "fix up" documents that writers themselves feel are adequate and effective.

The classroom peer group model operates on the assumption that once writers share their work with others they will discover what they must do to meet the demands of their audience, which in this case is none other than the group itself. In a work setting, however, writers will not voluntarily participate in peer review if they believe their writing skills are adequate. Their audiences are both internal and external, and if the environment does not provide a proper means of assessing writing effectiveness as determined by the primary audience, then writers may consider their supervisors as the primary audience, since these in-house readers will decide whether documents are appropriately written. Writers will tend to confuse their operational purposes for writing by placing more emphasis on impressing supervisors who will evaluate their writing, since promotion may depend upon this, than on meeting the needs of their users and clients (see, for example, Knoblauch's study). The cumbersome process of peer review would seem superfluous in such an environment, even though the intent of the process is to provide that sense of audience which supervisors often cannot.

The prospects of peer review in a work setting may appear bleak by my account. Conditions will not change on their own, and because of the complexity of the sociopolitical web that informs writers' attitudes, any attempt to alter the writing environment by either superiors or subordinates may be misconstrued as one more power play. What is encouraging, however, is that collaboration <u>does</u> take place and will probably continue to gain prominence in the writing processes of professionals.

Teachers of writing can help prepare students for this real world, where peer review <u>does</u> exist, by conditioning them to be more receptive to collaborative writing. By urging them to share their writing with others, by allowing them to form communities of writers within which the teacher-supervisor holds little more power than any other reader in the group, we can begin that slow infiltration process by which attitudes toward writing will eventually

be changed in the workplace. It has taken more than twenty years to admit that communication is a social process. It may take many more years before our students are in a position to fully embrace that process and make it work for their professions.

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